Position Statement: SB 777

Remarks to the House Agriculture Committee

April 18, 2006

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen of the House Agriculture Committee: I am Sandy Nordmark, a farmer from Calhoun County in south central Michigan. I grow raspberries, vegetables, and herbs on my 115 acre farm. I have been actively involved in production agriculture for over 40 years and hope to continue to serve my clientele with superior produce for many more years to come. But some of that future depends on you.

I am asking you to reject SB 777 as bad science and bad business for horticulturists like myself and my neighbors, many of whom are certified organic growers. I have been following the debate over this bill for some time and am struck by one very important misconception that repeatedly surfaces during the debates over the merits of the proposed legislation: the confusion over what would be included in the seed exemption. In addressing all seeds that might be used in agriculture, horticulture, floriculture and forestry, we are automatically including genetically engineered (GE) seeds, that with their animal counterparts can be called GMO's, or genetically modified organisms. I continue to hear proponents laud the benefits of these seeds and their place in the history of production agriculture, including the assumed benefits of enhanced production, resistance to certain herbicides, etc. Proponents may be mixing hybrids with GMO's. It is important to understand the difference.

Hybrid plants are those that have been developed by the crossing of parent plants with noted exceptional characteristics to enhance the next generation. These plants have been a mainstay of agriculture, horticulture, floriculture and forestry for years. These cultural hybrids are deliberately created by plant breeders to get a specific combination of genes from each parent that will hopefully pass along the preferred or enhanced traits. In addition, certain plants cross pollinate on their own. These can be plants that are related, such as broccoli, cabbage, and cauliflower that can pollinate each other; or pumpkins and zucchini which can cross pollinate to produce rather strange looking vegetables! There also occurs cross pollination between different cultivars of the same crop, such as between two or more kinds of summer squash that yields plants unlike either parent. Or, beets, carrots, corn, cucumber, radishes, onions, peppers and spinach varieties that when crossed with different varieties within each species usually create inferior or less desirable offspring. It is for these reasons that gardeners and farmers know to isolate certain plants from each other to prevent this undesired cross contamination.

Unfortunately, the introduction of genetically modified plant specimens into the landscape has changed all the rules of protection normally available through simple isolation. Unlike hybrids which share genes through the parent plants, but with dominant existing traits deliberately selected for, genetically engineered seeds are created in artificial environments in a lab, where scientists manipulate chromosomal DNA in ways

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the plant can not and does not do on its own. This has allowed for the insertion of all manner of unrelated genetic material into plant chromosomes to produce unnatural so-called "desirable" traits for a single purpose, such as herbicide resistance. This way, genetic material can be exchanged between unrelated plant species, or even plant and animal species. While the immediate or short term intended effect can be expressed assuredly, what is not known is what will be manifested over time in a natural and uncontrolled environment. Genetic drift caused by windblown or insect carried pollen often requires far greater distances of separation to avoid genetic contamination of preferred plants, especially where GMO's are grown in too close proximity to organic products. This has occurred where traditional and organic growers share borders or sometimes even farther away. Birds carry mature seeds from GMO seeded fields to non-GMO planted fields. In documented cases, GMO seeds, which are patented as man-created materials, "new" life forms, have contaminated and commingled with non-GMO crops, causing the innocent recipient not only to have to deal with that quality issue but resulting in fines and penalties for growing something he did not pay the patent rights on!

Corn is an especially troubling situation for organic farmers. Hybrid varieties of many different kinds of sweet corn have different spacing requirements for proper production. In some cases, certain varieties produce better in close proximity with others, while in other cases, some varieties must remain at least 250 feet away from other varieties. In the case of heirloom varieties, that separation is recommended to be at least a mile apart! The risk increases tremendously when genetic manipulation enters the picture, not only for the farmer who sells organic or heirloom sweet corn as a significant portion of his or her income, but organic livestock producers who must feed organic grains also risk losing their certification if they can not grow or buy organically certified corn and other feed grains due to genetic contamination. Other fruits, vegetables and herbs face similar risks if GMO creations are let loose uncontrolled in the environment.

A recent issue has developed with USDA's approval of GMO alfalfa seed, which the organic dairy industry views with great alarm. For them to meet national organic standards under which they market their products, their cattle must be fed organic hay as well as grain. We don't know yet what pollinating insects will do going between fields of organic and GMO alfalfa blossoms, but an entire fast-growing industry segment may be at irrevocable risk. As a dairy deficit state, it would be sadly ironic if Michigan were to eliminate the potential for organic dairy growth by raising the level of risk to unacceptable heights by passing this bill.

Organic production is the fastest growing segment of agriculture in Michigan and elsewhere. Denying local units of government in rural communities the option of regulation in favor of the organic industry that may be the principal economic engine in their midst denies legitimate producers an income by favoring non-organic farming, which is proving to be less competitive on a global scale. This is ~~not~~ neither good fiscal policy nor acceptable public policy. Therefore, I oppose passage of SB 777.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my concerns and recommendation.